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Two Accounts of Begging the Question

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ABSTRACT: This essay discusses epistemic analysis of the fallacy of begging the question. In the literature, there are two prominent epistemic explanations of the fallacy, the objective and the subjective. The objective account bases the analysis of the fallacy on the epistemic relations of the propositions used in the argument. The subjective account bases the analysis on the way the arguers acquire their beliefs in the propositions used in the argument. Arguments that aim to show that a propositional analysis is not flexible enough for fallacy analysis have been taken to be a decisive argument for the subjective approach. Yet, the propositional sense seems to address a central intuition about this fallacy. In this essay, it is argued that both analyses need to be retained.

KEYWORDS: begging the question, inference, inferential justification

1. INTRODUCTION

In the literature, there are two prominent accounts of the fallacy of begging the question.¹ These accounts have been termed as the subjective (SBQ) and the objective analysis (OBQ). SBQ has been developed by David H. Sanford (1971, 1981, 1988) and OBQ by John I. Biro (1977, 1984; Biro and Siegel 1992, 2006)². Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (1999) discusses the difference in succinct fashion, and also develops SBQ further. The gist of the difference between these two approaches is that OBQ claims that an argument begs the question, if it uses a premise that is epistemically posterior to the conclusion, whereas SBQ claims that an argument begs the question, if the arguer's belief in some premise is dependent on the belief in the conclusion or on the reasons to believe the conclusion.

This essay will argue that both of these accounts describe important aspects of the fallacy, and that they both should be retained. First, some preliminary distinctions and assumptions are noted. Second, the two views are presented. Next, it is studied how the objective account may be retained in the face of strong counter-examples by the

¹ I do not mean to suggest that the ideas captured by these two accounts have not been presented in the literature before. (See e.g. notes 2, 5, and 6 below.) However, this paper does aim for historical comprehensiveness. Further, I do hold that these two accounts present many essential features of the earlier accounts in approachable form and seem the most promising.

² In the footnote 5 of his 1977 article, Biro states that the "similarity with the *Prior Analytics* account of Aristotle should be obvious." See especially *APr* 64b29-39.

proponents of SBQ. It is argued that given that an abstract priority ordering can be assumed, OBQ can survive. Finally, the two accounts are compared and discussed.

Before proceeding, some definitions and assumptions should to be noted. First, I take an analysis of an argument to be epistemic if it takes as its starting point the view that an argument is a tool for acquiring knowledge or justified beliefs and evaluates the value of an argument in view of this purpose. Second, it is assumed that in order to provide an account of a fallacy, one should in principle be able to state whether some particular *instance* of arguing or inferring is fallacious, although there often are practical limitations that hamper this objective. This implies that one cannot ignore the process of inferring or arguing. This assumption is further supported by the canon of the fallacy theory that fallacies are arguments that are often bad arguments, but not always, because the quality of an argument is not only dependent on the structure of the argument but also on some other features of the relevant context. The arguer certainly is a part of the context. Another way of putting this is to emphasize that we should distinguish between arguments and their uses (See Sinnott-Armstrong 1999, p. 174; but also section 3 below).

I will also assume that to argue (or to infer) to a certain conclusion is a case of an epistemic basing: a basing relation needs to exist in order for the belief in the conclusion to be justified by the premises of the argument. This neither implies that the belief in the conclusion could not be justifiable for the arguer from some other beliefs that he or she has (or by non-inferential means) nor that the existence of basing is a sufficient condition for becoming justified in believing the conclusion. But only if there is a suitable basing, can the arguer (or the inferer) become justified in his or her indirect belief.³

In addition, it should be noted that this essay will deal with valid question-begging arguments but assumes that validity in itself does not make an argument question begging. Instead, the fallacy must be identified with other conceptual tools. I will also assume that begging the question is a special case of using an unwarranted premise. In the literature, this has been given many characterizations: an argument that begs the question has a premise that is not suitable for justifying its conclusion, because the premise is somehow dependent on the conclusion itself, or the argument makes an assumption in its premises that is reasonable only if the conclusion is reasonable, or the conclusion would need to be established before the premise in question can be used as a premise. In part, this essay also tries to explicate what this lack of justification consists of specifically.

2. THE TWO VIEWS

Let us now look at the difference between OBQ and SBQ in more detail. According to OBQ, the ability of an argument to make us justifiedly believe the conclusion is dependent on the epistemic relations that the propositions used in the argument stand in. An argument begs the question if one of its premises cannot be justifiably believed

³ This seems an acceptable assumption to both Biro and Sanford. Sanford (1981, p. 149-150) thinks begging the question is not purely a matter of form and content and that the matter should be conceived rather in terms of inferences than as arguments as formal objects: there need not be a direct correspondence between statements inferred in accord with some formal system and the lines of formal proof. It is important to take notice of the epistemic relations between the inferer, the premises and the conclusion. Biro (1984, p. 240) agrees but locates their disagreement in the way these epistemic relations are conceived.

TWO ACCOUNTS OF BEGGING THE QUESTION

independently of the conclusion.⁴ If it is the case that the premise can only be justifiably believed on the basis of the conclusion, the argument cannot help us to new justified beliefs. For example, suppose I were to argue that

(Cdp)

1. I clearly and distinctly perceive that there is a God.
2. Therefore, there is a God.

But suppose we knew that we could only be either in a demon-world or in a God-world. In the demon-world, one could not trust one's normal sources of belief, whereas in the God-world one could. In this type of a situation, to assume that one's clear and distinct perception has any validity, would be to assume that one were in a God-world: one could not justifiably believe one's clear and distinct perception about God, unless one were justified in believing that there is a God in that world. The premise is not justifiable to anyone in these circumstances without the conclusion first being justified.

Sinnott-Armstrong (1999, p. 179) notes that on this account, whether an argument begs the question is dependent solely on the propositions used, not on the beliefs held by the arguer or the hearer of the argument. To me, this propositional account is a very intuitive sense of begging the question, and one that has been with us for a long time. It can already be seen in Aristotle's *Prior Analytics*⁵ and is echoed in descriptions of the fallacy in the literature. For example Morris R. Cohen and Ernest Nagel (1934, p. 379) state that in the fallacy "a proposition that depends on the one at issue is introduced into the premises." It seems natural to interpret this dependency as the kind of epistemic dependency referred to by OBQ.

However, now consider the argument:

(Jon)

1. Jones is a man who has never married.
2. Therefore, Jones is bachelor.

As noted by John Woods (1999, p. 332)⁶, there seem to be cases where the use of this argument begs the question, and cases where its use does not beg the question, without this being dependent on what *can be* justifiably believed. Suppose that I have at time t_1 formed the belief that Jones is a bachelor from the way he appears to me, for example

⁴ John Biro (1977, p. 264) originally argued that the argument's role is to take us to new truths from truths we already know and that this presupposes that its premises can be known, are knowable, independently of the conclusion. This is exactly the quality that arguments that beg the question lack. In his 1984 paper, Biro commits himself to the criterion that "an argument begs the question when one of its premises cannot be known without knowing the conclusion" (1984, p. 242). But in subsequent sections of that paper, and in his 1992 paper (see fn. 22), he accepts that it might be preferable to state the condition in terms of notions like reasonable or warranted belief. We will discuss the nature of knowing something independently of something else below.

⁵ [...] since some things are naturally known through themselves and other things by means of something else (the first principles through themselves, what is subordinate to them through something else), whenever a man tries to prove by means of itself what is not known by means of itself, then he begs the point at issue. (*Prior Analytics* 64b29-39)

⁶ Woods (1999, p. 332) makes a similar criticism of J.S. Mill's criterion of begging the question: "every case where a conclusion which can only be proved from certain premises is used for the proof of those premises, is a case of *petitio principii*."

because I have a standing stereotype that does not justify the belief in the conclusion. By t_3 , I have forgotten this connection. In a discussion later on, I am asked why I seem to assume that Jones is a bachelor. As I have forgotten completely why I originally formed that belief, I search in my head for a way to prove that Jones is a bachelor. At t_2 , I have inferred the belief that Jones is a man who has never married from the belief that Jones is a bachelor, and this former belief remains in my memory. I now remember that belief and put forth the argument (Jon). My beliefs seem to go in an unacceptable circle, and it seems legitimate to claim that my argument begs the question.

Now think of the same argument in a situation where my own inferential behavior is different. Assume I have done some work with municipal registers and in the course of this noticed that an acquaintance of mine, Jones, an adult male, has lived in the same municipality all his life and has never married. In a discussion later on, I am asked why I seem to assume that Jones is a bachelor. I then produce argument (Jon). My argument seems fully legitimate and gives a good reason to believe that Jones is a bachelor. Hence, the same argument can beg the question and not beg the question depending on the way I actually formed the belief.

Another familiar example from the literature on this fallacy drives home the same point. Imagine that the following discussing takes place between a loan applicant and a bank manager:

A: Your loan application is in good order, but I need a credit reference.

B: Mrs. Smith will vouch for me.

A: Okay. It is just that I do not know Mrs. Smith. How can I know she is to be trusted?

B: Oh, I assure you she can.

It is not the case that one could not justifiably believe or know that the loan applicant can be trusted without knowing that Mrs. Smith can, or vice versa. But if the manager were to base her belief about the applicant's reliability on the belief that Mrs. Smith is reliable, and vice versa, she would clearly engage in a questionable epistemic practice. It is just this intuition that SBQ aims to capture: we must pay attention to how individuals go about forming their beliefs. If a reasoner bases his or her belief in the premise on his or her belief in the conclusion, wittingly or not, the argument begs the question. Sinnott-Armstrong (1999, p. 183) states that an argument begs the question if one's belief in the premise is dependent on (a) one's belief in the conclusion or (b) one's reason to believe the conclusion.

3. A DEFENSE OF OBQ

As noted, both developers of SBQ, Sanford and Sinnott-Armstrong, make it clear that on their account, the fallaciousness of the argument depends on which reasons one's beliefs are *actually* based. However, it can be shown that there needs to be no actual belief basing on the conclusion for an argument to beg the question.

Let us reconsider the argument (Cdp) from above. Assume that there are two philosophers, A and B, thinking about the argument (Cdp) and notice that the premise cannot be known without the conclusion. They would like to have an independent

TWO ACCOUNTS OF BEGGING THE QUESTION

argument for the premise but emphasize that they do not yet believe in the existence of God. They then remember that many things that they have clearly perceived to be the case, have turned out to be the case and add this as premise:

(Cdp*)

1. What I have clearly and distinctly perceived to be the case in the past has turned out to be true.
2. I clearly and distinctly perceive there is God.
3. Therefore, there is God.

However, A and B notice, after some reflection, that they can rely on their past experiences only if they can already trust their memory. But they cannot trust their memory, unless they are in a God-world. The circularity reappears. In this kind of deliberation, there is no actual belief basing on the conclusion. Quite the opposite, the arguers are careful not to commit themselves to any propositions. Intuitively, it seems that SBQ cannot account for our intuitions of the kind of dependency here.

Consider some further examples. First, think of an argument that begs the question by OBQ but has never been thought of by anyone. There are no beliefs involved, but it seems that the argument could involve relations that would allow us to call it question begging. Intuitively this should be possible. This possibility leans on the idea that certain propositions just cannot support certain other propositions in an abstract sense and arguments should reflect this. Consider another example: an argument that has such complex premises and a conclusion that it could never be believed by anyone cognitively as limited as a human being. In such a case, the argument could beg the question by OBQ but not by SBQ. The point of the previous example was to show that there could be arguments that beg the question without there being any *actual* inferring involved. In this latter example, the individual involved could not base his or her belief in the premise on the conclusion, because there is no belief to base. Yet, the argument could still be used for proving the conclusion. These examples seem to have the property of being epistemically deficient, and they beg the question.

Sinnott-Armstrong has a possible answer available here. His view of argument and arguing is similar to the one adopted here: an argument is an ordered pair of a set of propositions (the premises) and a proposition (the conclusion). He argues that “[t]hat is all there is to an *argument*, but that is not all there is to the activity of *arguing*” (1999, p. 174). On top of arguments we have particular uses of arguments. These particular uses of arguments have purposes, for example to prove, to explain or simply to figure out something. The arguments in themselves do not have purposes. Therefore, the cases are not really counter-examples, because it is only when someone puts forth an argument for the purpose of proving something, that a dependency is incurred. At first we only have an abstract propositional structure whose various relations become crucial only *after* they are being used with a certain purpose. (It has been conceded from the outset of this paper that validity is not the problem.) It is only in respect to the uses of arguments with particular purposes we want, or indeed can, judge arguments. Before we know how the relation of the given propositions is meant to be understood, we should withhold judgment.

This pragmatic idea of intention to use certain propositions certainly seems sensible. But this does not help with two of the previous examples. In (Cdp*), the

philosophers did try to base the belief in God just on the premises. In the case of the complex premises, the argument could still be used though its premises and conclusion could not be entertained as beliefs. But more importantly, one can effectively question whether the *relations* of the propositions must be conceived through this intention. Consider the two place predicate ‘... is an epistemically sound reason to believe ...’ The relation this predicate refers to is just as abstract as any proposition that may take the place of the dots. The predicate could be used to create a priority ordering, and this order of propositions is independent of any argument that may use them. The installment of propositions into the argument-construct makes use of the ordering. It does not create the ordering, and when properly done, it reflects this ordering. This is what the examples (Cdp) and (Cdp*) try to capture.

There is another possible rebuttal here. One could argue that in the situation described, the beliefs about God and perception are so inextricably bound that anyone entertaining any thoughts about the reliability of perception will have actually based this belief on the existence of God. But this would help only if we could assimilate all possible epistemic basing relations to actual basing relations. Even though we may disagree whether the epistemic relations of propositions as conceived by the objective account are of any use in ‘nailing’ fallacies, we surely want to hold that they are not the same thing.

Let us try to give this ‘epistemic priority’ a description that gives it some further content. We could assume that there can be a tree of knowledge (see e.g. Ernest Sosa 1979). In such a tree, those propositions in the lower nodes that are justified stand in a justifying relation to the propositions in the upper nodes. A proposition *p* is justified if and only if there is a path of justifiers from the base nodes leading up to *p* and this path involves the believer in no falsehoods. This path exists *irrespective* of any intentions to show these relations with the means of arguments.

What does it mean to beg the question in this ‘tree of knowledge’-sense? According to this view, an argument begs the question if an argument, an ordered set of propositions (the premises) and a proposition (the conclusion), has among the proposition(s) constituting the premises, proposition(s) that have an upper node-rank than the proposition that is the conclusion. We should also require that the nodes in question are connected by a continuous path from the base nodes and that there is no path to the premise node that does not go through the conclusion node. A proper ‘tree of justification’ is naturally just one structure that can be made out of those propositions that are being put into an order of epistemic priority. Once this epistemic priority structure has been worked out, we can form sets of those structures that deviate from the tree of justification in different ways. The structure that is formed from sets of propositions (the premises) and a proposition (the conclusion) that violate the priority ordering in respect to individual justificatory paths is the abstract description of the fallacy of begging the question. It is just as abstract as the proper tree of justification, the existence of which is not dependent on anyone actually arguing with the propositions in question. This is just an informal characterization, but the idea should be recognizable.

This should be the objective sense of the fallacy, but it is exactly the view that the (Jon)-case challenges. The tree of knowledge-view does not describe the contexts in which we normally infer. Typically there are many alternative routes to conclusions and premises. However, the objective sense is the original, and a very intuitive, sense of the

TWO ACCOUNTS OF BEGGING THE QUESTION

term and, more importantly, propositions that have not been used in an argument can still stand in relation of ‘... is an epistemically sound reason to believe ...’ The arguments (Cdp) and (Cdp*) also seem to refer to a context where this epistemic dependency would be the kind of sense of the fallacy that we would want to apply. In such contexts, it makes no difference whatsoever through which beliefs the arguer did arrive at the premise, the fact of the matter is that certain premises just will not do as premises for certain other conclusions, because of their own place in the tree.

The scope and applicability of OBQ turns on whether there are cases of such epistemic priority. (Cdp) and (Cdp*) certainly seem like candidates.⁷ If one were to hold that “[w]e may plausibly view every bit of knowledge as resting on a tree of knowledge, a tree-like justificational structure that terminates and involves no essential falsehood” (Sosa 1979, p. 79), OBQ would be the criterion to use. But of course, one need not think that all knowledge is so structured (and we have seen that it is not appropriate to all cases), but only that there are some justificational structures that fulfill this idea. So, I do not suggest that OBQ could make a comeback as *the* criterion of this fallacy. But I do suggest that when all the peculiarities of a particular reasoning in a particular context by a particular arguer have been peeled away, the objective sense of begging the question could still be there.

4. COMPARING THE TWO VIEWS

A proponent of the SBQ can accept the co-existence of these approaches. SBQ gives two sufficient conditions for begging the question, but this does not rule out that there could not be any other sufficient conditions. Sinnott-Armstrong (1999, p. 182) notes that the following case shows that dependence on belief in the conclusion is not necessary for begging the question:

Imagine a lawyer who presents strong evidence for his client’s innocence, but whose closing argument is simply, ‘My client is innocent, because she is.’ The lawyer [...] is trying to justify the conclusion. For that purpose, this use of argument begs the question [...] the lawyer cannot have any reason to believe the premise that is independent of his reason to believe the conclusion, since the premise and the conclusion are identical.¹⁷ This makes it beg the question even though the lawyer’s reason to believe the premise was independent of anyone’s belief in the conclusion. The evidence would have been just as strong even if the lawyer believed that his client was guilty, and so did the judge and the jury. Thus dependence on belief in the conclusion is not *necessary* for begging the question.

The idea that the strength of the evidence remains the same regardless of the closing argument seems to address the same concern OBQ is addressing: the evidence either is epistemically sound basis for her innocence or it is not. Whether it is or not, is not dependent on the lawyer’s use of this particular argument. But the strength of SBQ is supposed to be that it is able to cope with changes in the arguer’s evidential situation in a way that OBQ is not. Let us examine how.

⁷ The famous ‘proof’ of the external world by G.E. Moore (1939) also seems to qualify: Here is a hand, here is another hand. Therefore, there is an external world. Of course, the experience of seeing a hand goes nowhere of showing that there is an external world, unless one assumes that the hands are in the external world. We will come back to this example.

The argument in the lawyer case is made useless by the proof requirement that exists in the court. Even though the lawyer were justified in her belief in the premise, the court requires independent arguments to this conclusion and thereby creates a specific contrast class in respect to which the premise must be independent, regardless of the lawyer's personal justification. This notion of contrast class explains how the requirements of justification change and how SBQ can accommodate this (Sinnott-Armstrong 1999, section V). According to SBQ, the independence of a reason for a premise is defined by what is being questioned, and the questioning creates contrast classes in respect to which I need reasons to believe. For example, my seeing a hand is a reason for me believing there is a hand in front of me as opposed to believing that there is a foot in front of me. This is a so-called everyday contrast. My seeing a hand is not necessarily a reason for there being a hand in the external world as opposed to me merely having sense-data that there is a hand in front of me. This is a so-called philosophical contrast. SBQ can, according to Sinnott-Armstrong, explain this due to the fact that it considers the purposes of particular uses of arguments. For example, the lawyer's use of that premise is not suitable with respect to the relevant contrast class, the court context, independently of the personal justification that she has.

It is not obvious that a proponent of OBQ would be impressed by this explanation. Consider the hand-example. In the philosophical contexts, the issue is whether the hand could provide a reason for believing in the existence of external world, or, in terms of knowledge trees, whether there is a justificational path from the belief in seeing a hand to the belief in the external world. If the proponent of SBQ agrees that no matter how my beliefs about my hands and the external world are based, I beg the question if I try to go from my hand-belief to the external world-belief, then there is no disagreement about the argument in the philosophical context. Begging the question by OBQ implies begging the question by SBQ, but not vice versa. Accepting that fallacy theory deals with actual inferences and arguments human beings, i.e. instances of belief basing, does not imply that the more general epistemic relations of the propositions used are not important. Biro and Siegel (2006) concede that cases like (Jon) establish that their account does not fit to all cases. They (2006, p. 96) stress, however, that their account is supposed to rule on arguments. The *arguer*, e.g. the lawyer, putting forth an argument might beg the question or not, but that is not their main interest. Their account was meant to capture whether the argument does.

A proponent of OBQ could actually challenge SBQ based on this case. One could hold that the relations between the propositions *within* the contexts are independent of any questioning and of the way they are being used, and that the instances of the argument in the different contexts are in fact different arguments. The fact that in the philosophical context one is not allowed to use the assumption that one's hand is in the external world makes us reflect on the fundamental aspects of our knowledge. It makes us consider a different argument than the argument in the everyday context. The fact that one is allowed to use the assumption about the hand in the everyday context is not without its justification either. But whether the hand is in the external world is independent of anyone's questioning and that is crucial to what the argument can establish in the philosophical context. In the everyday context we take that assumption for granted, but surely the everyday argument is not interesting as *an argument* if it aims

TWO ACCOUNTS OF BEGGING THE QUESTION

to establish that there is an external world. The questioning, when reasonable, brings assumptions to our consciousness but also changes the argument.

Be that as it may, the question how the contrast classes are defined is certainly not an easy issue⁸. But this brings us to another point. OBQ has a clear definition to when exactly an argument begs the question. It is just that it fails to cope with all the interesting cases. SBQ can accept OBQ's cases as question begging, and addresses the remaining interesting cases, but it still owes us an account of when exactly the questioning makes an objective impact on our epistemic situation. Note that the second part of Sinnott-Armstrong's criterion is quite vague: an argument begs the question if one's belief in the premise is dependent on [...] one's reason to believe the conclusion. But we are again left with the question of just when is the belief in the premise unacceptably *dependent* on one's reason to believe the conclusion? I am dubious whether the notion of contrast class alone can do this by itself: not all challenges to our arguments are legitimate (and worth our time to answer), so not all challenges can impugn our justification to the premises. So the notion of contrast class needs an epistemic input, but we are not being told what that input is exactly. SBQ needs to develop a criterion which must be something wider than 'an argument begs the question if the premise must be justified through the conclusion,' as shown by the examples above. But it must also be something narrower than 'an argument begs the question if some premise of the argument cannot be known/justifiably believed in the relevant context and with respect to relevant challenges, unless the conclusion is known/justifiably believed.' This latter criterion would make all deductive arguments suspect. Consider:

(Met)

1. All pieces of metal expand when heated.
2. This is a piece of metal.
3. This piece of metal expands when heated.

It should be noted that this does not beg the question on OBQ, as it should not: the premise can be justified from other scientific propositions and need not involve this particular piece of metal. So, SBQ has its work cut out for it: to come up with ways of epistemically depending on the conclusion that are illegitimate. This will not be attempted here; such an account will have to address deep and difficult issues about epistemic support.

In order to defend the meaningfulness of SBQ, and its emphasis on individual reasoning, I propose one more example. Suppose that I believe that government G follows some policy P. I then hear of a disclosure, which, if true, would show that G has not followed P consistently. Yet, I am convinced that G follows P, so I infer that the disclosure is not veridical. I furthermore infer from this the belief that disclosures to the effect that G does not follow P are false, and this belief becomes part of my evidential basis for the belief that G follows P consistently. It seems that there is something very fishy in my reasoning strategy and that this has to do with begging the question and justification. To make the case even more strong, assume that new disclosures about violations of P keep coming to the public eye, and I keep on inferring that they are not veridical, because the previous disclosures have not been veridical either. This type of

⁸See e.g. Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (2002). What's in a Contrast Class? *Analysis* 62,1.

question begging as a feature of my reasoning strategy serves to immunize my beliefs from reasonable refutation, is clearly a problem of justification, but is not amenable to treatment in terms of epistemic priority.

5. BELIEF BASING AND PSYCHOLOGISM

There is one further issue that must be addressed here briefly. It is the charge that SBQ, as an account aiming at giving a normative account of argumentation, is too psychological in character (See Biro 1984, pp. 243-246; 1992, pp. 87-88). Sanford, for example, sees that the "...primary purpose of argument is to increase the degree of reasonable confidence which one has in the truth of the conclusion" (1972, p. 198). Biro and Siegel (1992, p. 87) claim that

a theory constructed along these lines will classify an argument as fallacious if it fails to achieve the belief change it is intended by its user to effect [...] a pure psychological theory says nothing about the *means* by which arguments effect their targeted change of belief: the *sole* requirement for success is causal efficacy. In particular, there is no requirement that the change be *rational* [...] or [...] there be any particular formal and/or evidential (logical or epistemological) relation between the argument and the change it causes.³

In the endnote 3 (Biro and Siegel 1992), it is explained that this belief change-view does not pay proper attention to the belief contents, but only deals with the belief states. Biro and Siegel (1992, p. 87-88) argue that the issue here is that without any idealizations, the psychological conditions are marred by radical relativism: the belief in the conclusion might be a mere causal consequence of the belief in the premise. Therefore, a proponent of the psychological theory must introduce some idealizations to avoid the relativism. But in this, a subjective theorist is led on a slippery slope, and cannot stop sliding before he or she has a theory about those properties of an argument that give it an *ability* to lead to rational belief changes. And this is what Biro and Siegel think a properly normative account of the fallacy must do, and in respect to the fallacy of begging the question, only an objective account can do. It must pick out the *property* that makes an argument valuable as an epistemic object.

But this is slightly unfair. Sanford (1981, p. 149) holds that the conditions for the evaluation of an argument are that (1) the premise is the case, and it implies the conclusion; and (2) the premise is believed, the implication is believed, and that neither of these beliefs is the result of the belief in the conclusion. This does seem to address evidential concerns. The case of the lawyer also showed that SBQ wants to, and needs to, address issues about evidence and intends to deal with other cases than just cases of *actual* basing. But in the previous section, it was noted that SBQ needs to provide a more specific analysis. The notion of contrast class needs some input on when the questioning points out a flaw in our reasoning and when not; when is the reasoning unacceptably based on the conclusion. However, this does not imply that one must accept OBQ as the only criterion.

The weight of this charge also depends on how one conceives fallacies. If we define a fallacy for example as "a mistake in reasoning, a mistake which occurs with some frequency in real arguments and which is characteristically deceptive" (Govier 1987), it does not seem a defect of fallacy theory that it involves a psychological aspect.

TWO ACCOUNTS OF BEGGING THE QUESTION

Not that the requirement of normativity is not important. But SBQ's requirement that the belief in the premise must not be based on the conclusion (or on the implication from the premise to the conclusion) is a defeater that states that under certain conditions, a certain belief in a given system of beliefs is not justified. This does not seem psychological in any objectionable sense. A fallacy theory that is interested in problems of reasoning, which occur with some frequency, cannot avoid the fact that our reasoning goes usually from one belief state to another and that the properties of these paths affect justification.

When does one apply OBQ and when does apply SBQ? Perhaps this question is wrongly put. A better question would be 'what do I need to look for overall if I am to evaluate the justification of the conclusion?' Since we tend to move from beliefs to beliefs, beliefs, not just their contents, being reasons, the subjective analysis is important. We want to examine the links the arguer's beliefs have, how the beliefs were incurred. If there is a problem in the argument according to SBQ, this casts doubt on the justificatory status of the conclusion belief. If there is an epistemic priority ordering in the context, one needs to evaluate the contents of the arguments in this respect as a violation of epistemic priority will make the argument ineffective. When there are many paths to propositions used in the argument, the priority relation does not hold, and consequently the property it defines cannot be ascribed to arguments. But there can nevertheless be defeating circumstances in the justification (or defeaters picking out attempts at justification with a specific property), namely those of basing the premise-belief on the conclusion-belief. As noted, SBQ can also possibly develop further criteria that pinpoint other problematic properties of justifications.

I believe this issue of interplay between belief basing by the arguer and the objective force of the argument used in inferential justification is a general feature of fallacy analysis and is not limited to the fallacy of begging the question. Consider the following example. I believe that theory T is correct, because an expert E said so. I am justified in believing that E is an expert in the relevant field. E is also in fact correct about T based on overwhelming evidence. I hence make a reasonable *argumentum ad verecundiam* inference. Suppose I then hear from a generally reliable friend that in the past, E has concocted evidence to support his theory. But my friend has made a mistake and confused E to some other scientist; E in fact is reliable. After hearing this mistaken information, I withhold my belief about T. But that has no bearing on the fact that E's word is an objectively good reason to believe T, because E's belief is based on good evidence. Matters internal to my belief system affect the justification of my inferential beliefs so that the objective justificatory capability of the arguments I employ is not the same thing as my justification for the conclusion-belief. But this does not nullify the fact that arguments have objective justifying capability. Fallacy theory needs to take notice of both the objective and the subjective side of inferential justification, if it wants to address the question whether someone actually is or could be justified in the deliverings of their reasoning.

6. CONCLUSION

This essay has argued that both the subjective and the objective sense of the fallacy of begging the question should be retained. Cases such as (Jon) show that in order to explain the fallacy in typical contexts of reasoning, one must pay attention to those epistemic

practices that are being applied in the process of justifying and to situations in which this occurs. This establishes SBQ. Nevertheless, OBQ can survive in some contexts. Admittedly this may be rare, but if there are cases where our justified beliefs form epistemic priority structures, there are cases where OBQ describes the fallacy.

[Link to commentary](#)

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